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AUTHOR O'Reilly, Robert C.
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ABSTRACT

Eight recommendations for superintendents' behavior toward school board members are developed in light of women's changing roles in society and in educational governance. The history of women's involvement in education, including their attempts and eventual success at gaining seats on school boards, is traced from the late 19th Century up to the 1970's and 1980's. Research is reported that contrasts female board members' attitudes with those of their male counterparts, and that correlates variations in the group dynamics of school boards with the presence of female board members. Examples of such research include a 1972 survey that analyzes school board composition by sex; a subsequent survey that examined female members' views of the board's role, and their behavior within the board; superintendents' relations with female and male board members; women's paths toward school board service; male and female board members' differing expectations and perceptions of superintendents; public attitudes toward female administrators; and time spent on their tasks by male and female board members. Recommendations for superintendent-board relations presented in the summary are intended for use with female board members but may be applied to any school board members. (MCG)

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Communication and Performance:

The Female Board Member and the Male Superintendent

by

Robert C. O'Reilly, Professor and Chair

Department of Educational Administration and Supervision

University of Nebraska at Omaha

Omaha, Nebraska

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Introduction

What is a woman's place? Is that place really determined by gender? Or, is it more a function of age, socio-economic status, or other factors? Or is it more a function of the geographic setting in which women happen to be at some point in time? That place has changed in America, and vacillation has been the hallmark of that change. In Daniel Boorstin's analysis of colonial America -- which he did in the 1950s -- he was struck with the diversified roles that women filled in 18th century American life. With the emergence of a discernible middle class in 18th century Europe, there occurred a substantial improvement in the education of European females, and that was one antecedent to conditions in America. Adding to that condition, he discovered evidence indicating that colonial American females were "more versatile, more active, more prominent, and on the whole more successful in activities outside the kitchen than were their English counterparts" at that same point in time. Household manufacturing gave an opportunity for American wives and daughters to join, and they did. Women were printers, newspaper publishers, apothecaries, general medical practitioners, merchants, and tradeswomen. Two factors were primary contributors to this situation. First, there was scarcity of labor. Second, colonial laws tended to apply alike to men and to women, conferring upon women such legal rights and powers as were necessary to carry on businesses and to secure divorces.

In a certain sense, social-economic regression came to American females in the 19th century, and stereotypical views of the woman's place prevailed. That is, aside from occupational narrowness, females were expected to be more passive and less assertive, more conforming and less independent. Managerial roles were not in the approved behavior patterns for 19th century American females, and that stereotype predominated through the early part of the 20th century, perhaps to be broken most emphatically by enfranchisement.

Briefly stated, it is from such a set of behavioral conditions, traceable over 250 years, that American females have come to sit on public school boards of education, and to engage in the policy development and decision making for those organizations. The changes have been evolutionary and to some extent, contradictory. Where then, is the heritage of rationality and efficiency that a superintendent might like to see in a board member? Can the tasks included in homemaking, career development, and public service be carried satisfactorily by one person? Are age, education, and experience more important factors than sex in the ability of females to perform cooperative and analytical tasks in organizations, as a group might strive for rational decision making? Now, nearing the end of the 20th century, are American females in a transitional posture in regard to their effectiveness in public organizations? Are there substantial differences in the backgrounds, styles, and interests of females from males as they serve on public school boards? Do sex-oriented differences affect board member-superintendent relationships?

Data and Information

School board membership has been predominantly male turf. It still is, in the mid 1980s. Even though education is labor intensive and a female

dominated enterprise, the school governance function has been male dominated.

Yet, women have been heavily involved and heavily committed in school activities. Early common school promoters and founders were inclined to involve women in those schools. Seen as child bearers, mothers, and homemakers, women were seen as "natural" teachers of children outside of the home; after all, they were the teachers of children within the home.¹ A role as educator was not the same as a role engaging the governance of education.

In the latter 19th century, even preceding women's enfranchisement, there was agitation for the service of women on public school boards. Boards were larger, with twenty or more members being common for large city school districts. Chicago, with a board of nineteen members appointed by the mayor, was one of the first such cities in which females were seated on the public school board.

It was in the 1870s that the Chicago Women's Club began to lobby for female participation in school governance. Club members had a great common interest in schools and in teacher quality. That interest led to discussions of problems, and in 1877 a petition was forwarded to the mayor requesting the appointment of two Women's Club members to existing board vacancies. The petition contended that since women constituted 1250 of the 1300 teachers in the Chicago schools, there could be no doubt that females had the ability, fitness and fidelity to also serve in governance. In declining the petition, the mayor used a stereotypical Victorian argument, explaining that boards engaged in the discussion of many topics that were not really "suitable topics of conversation between men and women." Several petitions and years later (in 1888), Mayor John Roache appointed Mrs. Ellen Mitchell from the membership of the Women's Club to the Chicago Board of Education, to become the first woman on that governing board.²

If the surveys of board membership done during the 1940s and 1950s can be accepted as reliable, it appears that no more than 12 percent of public school board membership was filled by women. In the seventh annual survey of school board members, reported by the National School Board Association in 1985, the typical board member was white, male, age 41 to 54, married with children in public schools, a college graduate who is a manager or professional and with a family income of \$30,000 to \$40,000. That typical label marks a very important change, however, because it marks the increasing number of female board members. The survey of 1982 membership revealed 28.3 percent female members; in 1983, female membership was 37.1 percent. In 1984, the survey respondents were 38.3 female. By other inquiry measures, it is clear that approximately one-third of the school board members in 1985 are women.³ By sheer volume, a new presence, distinguishable by gender, has suddenly come to American boards of education. Given that superintendents are characteristically male, and that the arrival of a female presence has been recent, does that situation indicate any need for real change in the superintendent-board relationships? The survey and interview literature seem to provide a resounding "Yes!" to that question.

Blanchard's 1972 survey found that among school boards responding to an NSBA survey, it was indicated that fewer than one-third had at least one woman serving on the local board; that another one-third of the boards had only one female member; that of the 532 participating boards, only fourteen had more women members than men. In a subsequent national survey administered to 1,000 local board members, both male and female, some substantially different service attitudes emerged. Women, much more than men, indicated that local board members should listen to the complaints and grievances of parents and stay in close contact with state and federal legislators. He

concluded that this meant that "among the women a sensitivity to community needs and desires, and an orientation to communicate with important constituencies outside of the educational world" were prevailing behavioral guides.

Responses made it clear the local boards with at least two women members had more internal conflict. Whether the conflict was random or spasmodic, the female presence indicated a likelihood of open, lively discussion and debate. That is, board congruence and harmony were important to both men and women, but women also prized open discussion and were much less willing to engage in concealment of differences. For those patrons who see a need for some conflict on issues being addressed by a board, the presence of female members is good assurance that critical questions will be raised. While alluding to NSBA research that indicated a strong preference from the superintendent group for male boards of education, most of that preference seemed to be couched in a desire to circumvent critical discussions of issues--- a provincial view that surely has run its course in the first 75 years of this century.⁴ By their different views and interests, women represent a huge human resource that should be brought to bear as school boards tackle educational problems, and their presence should be encouraged by superintendents.

From a survey conducted at about a midpoint in this extraordinary growth, some characteristics of the "woman on the board" emerged. She can cope. She is outnumbered but not outclassed. She may be a member of an unmilitant minority, but not undetermined and may feel constrained to bring a feminine viewpoint to board discussions. She can carry an exhaustive schedule through a sometimes patronizing setting because she is using the board member role to accomplish something to which she accords importance. She is in her middle years, married, but without tiny tots.⁵

The Mullins survey included a number of extended comments from respondents, several of which focused on what the women called people problems and/or constituency problems. In general, they seemed to indicate a greater interest in responding to their constituency than how males responded to what might be the same people. In order to have this "sympathetic ear," women had to take time to learn, and to listen. A typical statement came from a woman serving on a board in a Southwest state: "The first year I served as a board member, I visited each teacher and classroom in our entire system of 3,000 students. It took me six hours a day, five days a week for almost four months, but it enabled me to have a fuller and better understanding of our school district's problems."⁶ If this board behavior represents any substantial part of the female membership on LEA boards, superintendents have a major problem to attend in terms of how they relate to their boards.

This hesitancy of superintendents to accept females was well demonstrated in a later, mid-seventies survey of Mullins.⁷ Analyzing the questionnaire responses of over 500 superintendents as they sought to identify the ideal board member, the superintendents wanted professional, white collar men. They wanted community representativeness, except when it came to gender. One-third were explicit, stating they did not want women on their boards, even while declaring for the desirability of racial minorities and for parents with children in the school system as board members.

Not only was it voiced in the earlier Mullins survey, but in a more recent survey done among the 536 female board members in Ohio public schools, the questions of sex prejudice, bias, and discrimination were discussed. The earlier, national survey carried sex-discrimination at a high complaint level. The 1978 survey of women in Ohio addressed the topic but reported that more than half of the respondents felt no prejudice against them. Yet, even in a

condition of reduced discrimination, 35 percent reported that male board members thought less of their abilities, simply because they were female. There was some sentiment that the board member-superintendent relationship, male to male and based in a like kinship camaraderie, was better than the female board member to male superintendent. Of those Ohio respondents revealing their perceptions of certain school conditions in the latter 1970s, only 43 percent agreed that an "all-female board of education would be as effective as an all-male board." The typical respondent was white, 35-49 years of age, middle or upper class, with three to four children; over 45 percent were employed full or part time, and of that group, the most frequently named occupation was teacher. Additionally, of those not working outside the home, 26 percent had been teachers at one time. The survey did fulfill some of its goals, one of which was to discover the presence or absence of differences in females serving on local public service boards.⁸ To the extent that the Ohio characteristics can be carried to other geographical settings, it seems clear that new techniques of communication and new modes of operation are called for when superintendents of schools find women seated on the board of education. This characteristic prevails because, as the AASA reported in 1984, 98 percent of the nation's 16,800 school district chief executives were male -- that only 293 were female.

A survey of the forty-five school districts in DuPage County, Illinois, was conducted to determine the roles played by women as they are becoming a much more dominant force in school board operation. Working from 210 returned questionnaires, information revealed that these board members were very like their sisters in Ohio, demographically speaking; moreover, the respondents were 57 percent male and 43 percent female. From the responses, several male-female board service differences were deduced:

1. Women go onto boards in a direct succession to other involvement with the school system.
2. Women become more personally involved, reflecting comparatively more experience than men in volunteer, non-profit organizations.
3. Women hold an expectation of effective and efficient leadership from the superintendent.
4. Women come from the PTA, the AAUW, the League of Women Voters, and so on with behavioral norms sanctioned by such organizations.
5. Women tend to give priority to curriculum and program quality, and to public relations programs.
6. Women are comparatively more sensitive to a constituency, partly because of informal networks in their organizations of origin (#4, above); by the creation of policies through open debate, rather than as a corporation board of trustees.

The differences noted in the Illinois study suggest several changes in school board operation. Because women are changing the decision making process, becoming more involved in local issues, attempting to increase public involvement, and ignoring traditional school governance patterns, the board-superintendent relationship is changing. Boards will spend more time in evaluation of goals and methods, will become more involved in school system decisions, and the distinction between administration and governance will become blurred. There is occurring a power shift. The Illinois study suggests that superintendents must support that shift with board member orientation and training, and must incorporate a new role for their own position, working as consultant rather than as administrator-manager to the local board in many key issues.⁹

An Arizona study of six counties devoted to board problems having a gender origin disclosed that male and female board members are very likely to have different expectations of the superintendent with whom they work. Unlike Illinois and Ohio, in the Arizona setting fewer than 10 percent of the board members were female. Among other things, the study showed that superintendents were more at ease when talking privately to male board members, that female board members felt they received less information from the

superintendent than was given to male counterparts, that females were more willing to argue -- privately -- with the superintendent. The district budget emerged as a distinct area of sex difference in viewpoint. Females saw the budget as a way to describe goals and priorities, as in a format that was hard to understand, as something that was confusing and uninformative, and as a thing that the superintendent should make plain. Males, however, who also saw the budget as confusing were willing to accept it on good faith that the superintendent knew what he was doing. Less tolerant of confusing communication, females demanded clarification, explanation, and justification.¹⁰

To some extent, the same supports and prejudices that pertain to women serving on boards of education apply also to women in school administration. This study of persons who would support women as school administrators revealed that younger, higher socio-economic status, urban dwellers were willing to support and accept female school administrators. Uniformly, the favoring respondents were more likely to approve women as elementary principals than as secondary principals or superintendents. Although this was a west coast population of respondents, the results seem generalizable; i.e., people are willing to accept female leadership in education, but in a restricted manner.¹¹

Despite the fact that a general sentiment still exists in American culture that would limit the female presence at decision-making levels for public school districts, their increasing presence on school boards indicates some waivering of that sentiment. Women are being elected to boards in radically new proportions, and they do perform differently on those boards.

A 1978 study of New Jersey board members analyzed the time per week spent in board activities by male and female members. Excluding some school related activities, the study revealed that women spent 10.4 hours per week on board

business, and that men spent 8.3 hours per week on board business. There was some evidence, though limited, that a female board presence heightened conflict with the superintendent; however, these investigators found no relationship between the number of women on the board and the amount of board-superintendent disagreement. From among all 331 board members responding, those not gainfully employed, or only part-time employed outside the home, spent more time on school business than any members---male or female---who were full time employed.¹²

Summary

There is no doubt that characteristics on boards of education are changing demographically. More than socio-economic status, age, or race, the most current noteworthy change is in the sex identification of members. Not yet predominant in membership, women are in sharp ascendancy in numbers. It is both as a transitional and fluid situation in which contemporary women are finding a place on public school boards. They perform differently as members on boards, and relationship-performance patterns that may have been quite acceptable between male superintendents and male board members will falter and may fail in a female-male work relationship. The availability of time and sex differentiated cultural differences influence this different performance.

The materials in this paper have been analyzed by the author, using both administrative theory and broad school operations practical experiences as a base for comparison, contrast, and consideration. From that analysis it is possible to make some recommendations for superintendents of the 1980s about board member relationships.

Recommendations:

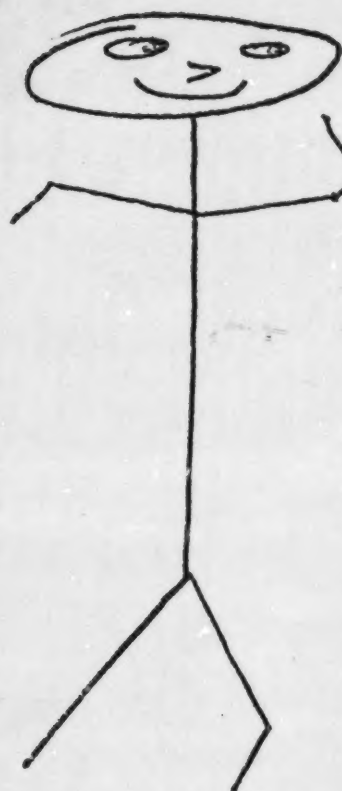
1. Create a spirit of cooperation between the superintendent and every board member.
2. Engage in no discrimination by sex with females on the board.
3. Incorporate more flexibility in job performance/style.
4. Improve clarity (frequency?) of communication to the board.
5. Invite and encourage board members to more broadly participate in all school activities.
6. Engage in orientation and in-service sessions to increase the effectiveness of both males and females in board service.
7. Accommodate the different interests that women hold in high priority; e.g., more toward curriculum and instructional quality and less toward finance.
8. Work out interpersonal conflicts in private conversation.

In the main, these recommendations are valid for a superintendent facing females, or males. Yet, for nearly all the recommendations, there are subtle differences---differences of degree---that are advantageous for any superintendent to incorporate in a professional performance role, and those shades of difference are indicated by the gender differences that surveys indicate to be present, separating female from male board members. None of the recommendations are outside of good administrative theory; all can be incorporated by a superintendent in any job setting.

INTERRELATIONSHIP RECOMMENDATIONS:
SUPERINTENDENT AND BOARD

1. CREATE A SPIRIT OF COOPERATION BETWEEN THE SUPERINTENDENT AND EVERY BOARD MEMBER.
2. ENGAGE IN NO DISCRIMINATION BY SEX WITH FEMALES ON THE BOARD.
3. INCORPORATE MORE FLEXIBILITY IN JOB PERFORMANCE/STYLE.
4. IMPROVE CLARITY (FREQUENCY?) OF COMMUNICATION TO THE BOARD.
5. INVITE AND ENCOURAGE BOARD MEMBERS TO MORE BROADLY PARTICIPATE IN ALL SCHOOL ACTIVITIES.
6. ENGAGE IN ORIENTATION AND IN-SERVICE SESSIONS TO INCREASE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF BOTH MALES AND FEMALES IN BOARD SERVICE.
7. ACCOMMODATE THE DIFFERENT INTERESTS THAT WOMEN HOLD IN HIGH PRIORITY: E.G., MORE TOWARD CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTIONAL QUALITY AND LESS TOWARD FINANCE.
8. WORK OUT INTERPERSONAL CONFLICTS IN PRIVATE CONVERSATION.

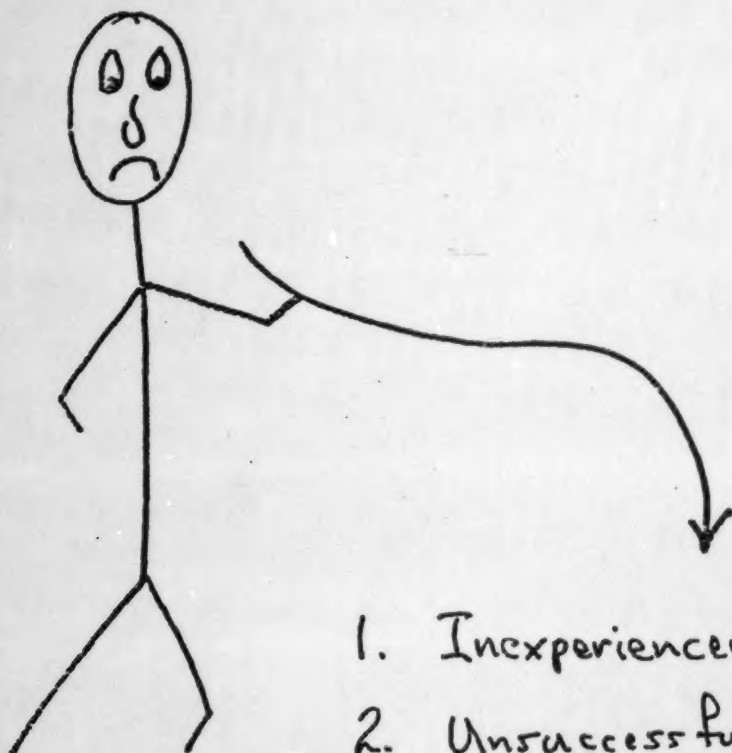
Good Schoolboard Members



1. Believe in public schools
2. Are willing to learn
3. Can cooperate
4. Can take criticism
5. Are honest + sincere
6. Have financial understandings
7. Are willing to progress
8. Are open minded
9. Are punctual
10. Are courteous

Source: John Almack, 1927
Adapted: RCO, UNO, 1985

Bad Schoolboard Members



1. Inexperienced young men
2. Unsuccessful men
3. Retired men
4. Politicians
5. Newspapermen
6. Unlearned men
7. Men in subordinate positions
8. Women

Source: William Chancellor, 1915

Adapted: RCO, UNO, 1985

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